

The Fourth Church Pulpit

CHRISTMAS AND THE CHILD IN US

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John M. Buchanan

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094
312.787.4570 John M. Buchanan, Pastor

“...unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God.”
Matthew 18:3 (NRSV)

There is a delightful Ring Lardner vignette, about a father whose child was asking a devilishly difficult question, over and over again, with great and annoying persistence. Finally, the father's exasperation comes out. “Shut up,” he explained.

There is more than a little of that at Christmas. “Shut up,” he explained, may be the best any of us can do which may be the reason a lot of us do just that when it comes right down to it: turn the proceedings over to the choir to sing what we are not capable of articulating intelligently. Or better yet, the children. There is something about Christmas that is always more clearly celebrated in a children's pageant or choir than in the finest theological essay.

There is theological truth in the euphemism that “Christmas is for the children,” for the simple reason that children seem quite content to celebrate it, rejoice in it, without wasting much time trying to explain it and understand it. And if you have any doubt about who wields the most power, who drives the economy of Christmas, take a look at the neighborhood's newest phenomenon: the huge line shivering in the December cold, all the way down to the corner of Michigan and Pearson, waiting to gain admittance to a toy store — a magic wonderland of sights and sounds and mystery and fantasy and, one assumes, very significant profits. Christmas is for children, in more than one way.

In fact Jesus himself would not argue with the sentiment. He talked about children quite a lot actually, used their street games to illustrate a point he was making and on one memorable occasion brought a child into the midst of his band of followers and said, “Here, this is what I mean. Unless you become like this child, you've missed the point, missed your chance, in fact, to enter the Kingdom.” Sometimes I imagine him holding a tiny infant at that moment, and sometimes I imagine a bashful, terribly uncomfortable five-year-old.

Part of his own formation as a child was the hearing and then the learning to read Scripture in his home and in the Synagogue in Nazareth. Some scholars think that the book of the prophet Isaiah was so important to him that when he became a man he set out intentionally to live its powerful image of the obedient servant who suffers unto death. And so when he brought a child into the midst of adult company and said, “Become like this,” I think he was remembering ancient words.

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child shall lead them.” [Isaiah 11:6]

What started it all was a question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” That's a very adult, heavy question. It reflects a view of the kingdom and of religion which is very serious business: obeying the rules, following all the prescriptions, attending to the minutia of the law, scrubbing the pots and pans according to prescription, keeping proper diet, avoiding work on the Sabbath, and over the years building one's case for entry to the very presence of God. It is to that religion, that way of being religious, which seemed inevitably to become a pinched, restrictive, negative practice of spirituality, that he responded by bringing a child to them. There are two reasons, I think. First, there is no question of an infant's earning his/her own way into the kingdom on the basis of accumulated good works, obedience, and fulfilling the requirements of the law. It's one of the reasons we baptize infants: they haven't had a chance to try to be religious yet. And second, that child — wide-eyed, looking around in amazement at everything, drinking it in, sensing life as a delicious smorgasbord to be tasted and enjoyed — that wide-eyed, wonderful child is alive, is experiencing God's good gift of life in a way the rigid, obedient, self-righteous religionists had long abandoned and forgotten.

So I think the point of this exercise is grace and wonder, which seem to be more accessible to children than to adults; or to frame it slightly differently, to the child which may still live within each of us.

That is a thought contributed to the conversation fairly recently, at least in the Western World. For centuries, in art, education and the social structures of society, children were regarded in one sense as simply miniature adults — in paintings from the Renaissance, for instance, children, even infants, are simply little men and women. In another sense our culture used to regard children as commodities to be used in factories, for instance. Education was thought to be the strenuous process by which children were throttled, restrained, conditioned, molded, trained. Children were to be seen and not heard. I sometimes think that the entire focus of the first six years of my own public school education can be reduced to one word — control: control enforced by intimidation, humiliation and, with some frequency, physical punishment which people my age thought was the norm. Stunning to realize, isn't it, that you don't have to inflict pain to endure learning?

Our coming so late to an appreciation of childhood as a discreet and important stage in human development, in fact, absolutely critical to the healthy formation of persons, is perhaps most eloquently expressed in the fact that this culture, this country, is not a very good place for children, particularly if you happen to be poor.

In every measurable statistic, American children are in trouble, specifically education and health, and on top of it all now, the gangs, drugs and the guns. Every week the tragedy continues. Every week they are killed. Every week we sacrifice a child or two or three to preserve our right to own semi-automatic weapons, the Constitutional right to bear arms, by which the N.R.A. rationalizes its opposition to modest gun control, perverted into the right to kill children.

We pay our New York school janitors more than teachers. Jonathan Kozol, who writes with passion and clarity about the shameful disparity in funding public education in this country, says there is nothing more tired or ridiculous than the oft-repeated euphemism that you can't improve education by throwing money at schools. Why not, he asks? What should we throw at them? We improve lots of things by throwing money at them. Why don't we say you can't build a better Army by throwing money at it? Besides the only place money is actually thrown at schools is in the suburbs. In the places where the need is really intense we're talking about not enough toilet paper, plaster falling off the ceiling, no art or music classes or counselors, and track practice, not on a fabulous artificial track around a groomed athletic field, but in front of the school on the broken, glass-covered street.

"Whoever welcomes one such little one welcomes me," he also said. Two items in *The New York Times* this morning create counterpoint. One, a picture essay, immediately following a gorgeous ad featuring twelve holiday "dip" recipes, of the children of Somalia . . . an almost unbearable sequence of pictures, made bearable only by the knowledge that our young men and women are on their way to help their brothers and sisters — the children. And in the editorial section, a conversation with James Garbarino, Director of the Erikson Institute, leading expert on the long-term effects of violence on children. Dr. Garbarino lists all the places — Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Palestine, Bosnia, Cabrini-Green — our own Third World Country — where by the age of five almost every child has either seen a shooting or knows someone who was shot.

Education, pushed by child psychology, began to change in the past half century. A new notion gained currency that "in order to live full and authentic lives, we must reawaken the spontaneity, curiosity and sense of delight that seems to be the rule of childish existence." [*Apology for Wonder*, Sam Keen, p. 43]

Ohio State psychiatrist, Hugh Misedone wrote a popular textbook in the 60s, *Your Inner Child of the Past*, in which he argued that all our lives we live with and are influenced by our inner child.

And Thomas Harris, in *I'm OK - You're OK*, popularized the notion that there are actually three personalities inside each of us; a parent, an adult and a child — and that for most of us the process of maturing involves our parent and our adult growing, crowding out the child in us. The child is where we play, experience delight and wonder, it is where our sexuality resides. Our adult is the person that conducts serious business, and the parent enforces the rules. Significantly, in light of our text, Harris said religion is mostly parental activity.

In the past twenty years or so there has been a revolution in the way we view children and the child in us, and as ordinarily happens when major intellectual shifts occur, the leading edge can go too far. And so in the name of “getting in touch with,” “listening to” and “freeing up your inner child,” some peculiar things have happened. Al Franken, on “Saturday Night Live,” has great fun with the mindless excesses of the inner-child movement with his character, Stuart Smalley. Smalley is the innocent, wide-eyed, childlike man who is totally involved in a number of self-help programs, workshops, therapy groups, and who says, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough and doggone it, people like me.” In a new book of *Daily Affirmations* by Stuart Smalley, there is a sequence focused on the child in us. Smalley’s titles for each day are self-explanatory.

“Monday — I will love my inner child.
Tuesday — I deserve good things.
Wednesday — Today I will focus on me.
Thursday — I refuse to beat myself up.”

The affirmation for April 15 takes on the serious matter of rationalizing irresponsibility with the jargon of the inner child:

“Today (April 15) I will file for an extension on my income taxes. I just clean forgot! But that’s okay. I’m entitled to an extension!”

Last Monday, the *Chicago Tribune* carried a Jules Feiffer cartoon in which an obviously stressed middle-age man is having a conversation with his inner child. The child in several frames of the cartoon says in effect, “You abandoned me when you were 12, and so I’m going to torment you till the day you die.” The man says, “So, I invited my inner child to go play in traffic.” Next frame: “Crash.” Final frame — the stressed man is now leaping joyfully in the air, “I’m free!”

It is easy to sentimentalize this text and this topic. Children are not perfect. Children are demanding, messy, noisy and unapologetically self-centered. Grandparenting is wonderful and the most wonderful part is that when the baby is fussy and dirty, you can hand him back to his parents. Just this week a grandmother told me the only sight more lovely than the headlights of the car bearing her grandchildren appearing in her driveway is the sight of the taillights as they leave.

But the important truth which we now know, and which Jesus meant, is that full and authentic human life, life in touch with its purpose, its creation and its end, is life lived in the wide-eyed wonder of childhood. And there is, for me, always a reminder of that at Christmas.

Sam Keen wrote an influential book in 1969, *Apology for Wonder* in which he suggested that basic wonder at the sheer miracle of religion is at the heart of all religion. Artists and poets help us wonder at the miracle of our being, even when religion forgets.

D. H. Lawrence in *The Wild Common*, describing the sights and sounds, smells of clearing in the woods:

“How splendid it is to be substance, here! All that is right, all that is good: All that is God takes substance!”

And Walt Whitman's popular:

"There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon,
And that object became part of him . . .
The early lilacs became part of the child
And grass and white and red morning glories."

Wonder at the world, the sounds, sights and smells of the beautiful creation. Wonder before its mystery, but also wonder at what we are learning about it, what we already know. Wonder at a process we understand, like human conception, gestation and birth and which moves us as deeply as it did those ancient people who assumed it was caused by the moon. [Keen, *op. cit.*]

Albert Einstein once wrote:

"The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder, is as good as dead."
[See David H. D. Read, *Curious Christians*]

Christmas is for that within you which experiences wonder — a place in your soul you may not visit very frequently, a capacity you may not exercise much because you are so busy, so determined, so committed, so adult. Christmas is an invitation in quiet simplicity, to hear again a wonderful story about an infant, a mother and a father, and the God who gives them to us.

It was such a familiar question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" They were trying so hard to measure up, to be good enough. They were men and women whose religion had taught them that the harder they tried, the more rules and regulations they kept, the more sacrifices they performed, the closer they would be to God's kingdom. Life conspires to teach us that it seems: be determined, get ahead, try harder, work longer hours, push, push, push and you will receive your reward. And Jesus told them something which was stunning in its simplicity and which has set men and women to wondering ever since:

"God's kingdom is not a goal to be accomplished, a race to be won, a prize to be earned. It is a gift. It has already been given. And all you can do with a gift ultimately is what a child does with life — receive it, rejoice in it, live in it, be grateful for it, admire it, and in sheer wonder, laugh and weep and sing about it."

The haunting Appalachian carol, for me, has always gathered up the beauty and the mystery:

"I wonder as I wonder out under the sky
How Jesus the Savior came for to die
For poor, ornery people like you and like I.
I wonder as I wonder out under the sky."